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AUTHOR Halperin, Samuel
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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of national interest in youth service is due, in large part, to the national organizations that have grown so vigorously in recent years. Some explanations for the almost sudden reappearance of youth service as a nationwide issue are: (1) many Americans are fed up with narcissism, personal gratification, and me-centered pursuits; (2) Americans have discovered that they are no longer number one in the world; (3) the nation's leaders in industry, government, and the media have faced the potentially disastrous shortage of productive young people; (4) children and youth suffer from deficits in learning skills and self-esteem; and (5) a growing body of research shows again that education should include both schooling and experience. Along with the growing interest in and popularity of youth service go a number of pitfalls of which leaders in the youth service movement need to be aware. Service should not be seen as a way of "privatizing" the financing and provision of major public services. Service is not cost free but requires the outlay of additional dollars even though it creates tax savings and public savings. Service programs must be quality programs. Youth service must become an integral part of the formal education process. Finally, service should not be viewed as little more than another form of philanthropy or social responsibility. Every young person is a potential contributor. (YLB)

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# What's Wrong With Youth Service?

YOUTH SERVICE AMERICA

■ Campus-Based

● School-Based

▲ Service & Conservation Corps

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# What's Wrong With Youth Service?

An address
to the
National Youth
Leadership Council
January, 1989

by
**SAMUEL HALPERIN**
**Study Director**
**Youth and America's Future:**
**The William T. Grant Foundation**
**Commission On Work, Family and Citizenship**

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***Editor's Note:*** *There has been a surge of national interest in youth service due, in a large part, to the national organizations that have grown so vigorously in recent years. These organizations, among them Campus Compact, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League(COOL), and the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, have helped individual youth service programs become part of a movement by building a nationwide program network.*

*Youth Service America (YSA) is the national advocate that represents the entire youth service movement. Under the auspices of YSA , a Working Group on Youth Service Policy representing 16 major youth service organizations has been formed to coordinate support for legislative initiatives on youth service.*

*One of the principles espoused by the Working Group is that the grassroots network of state and local programs developed by these organizations must become the foundation of a partnership between the federal government and state and local governments. This will insure the existence of diverse, creative programs throughout the United States..*

# What's Wrong With Youth Service?

## Introduction

Youth community service is on a roll. Across the length and breadth o this very large nation politicians, pundits and pollsters are telling us th 1989 and 1990 will be big years for the expansion and establishment o youth service programs.

• **Item**: President Bush, pledged to create the YES Foundation (Youth Enter Service to America), has already established a White House Office of Nationa Service. As part of his plans to promote "a kinder, gentler nation," youth ser will be given a position of prominence that it has not enjoyed since Presiden Kennedy created the Peace Corps by Executive Order in 19611. Indeed, Was ton anticipates that youth service to be the centerpiece of a broader "Thousa Points of Light" strategy early in the Bush Administration.

• **Item**: Up on Capitol Hill, youth service and national service bills are being introduced in greater numbers than ever before. What is different about you service in the new 101st Congress is that some of the most powerful and resp members are now making passage of their bills a genuine priority, and the leadership of both the House and Senate has promised to bring these measu a vote before the end of the 101st Congress.

• **Item**: Nationally, Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich, through his leadersh the Education Commission of the States, has launched a campaign to enlist C Million Mentors for America's at-risk youth. Many of these mentors will be y people, engaged in peer tutoring and counseling, organized and stimulated Campus Compact or by COOL (Campus Outreach Opportunity League) on campuses across the nation.

• **Item**: In state and local governments, youth service programs continue to new legitimacy and increased appropriations. In California, the director of t California Conservation Corps is a member of Governor George Deukmejian Cabinet. In Pennsylvania, the Legislature has approved Governor Robert Ca budget request to start a variety of statewide youth service iniatives. Similar moves are afoot in a dozen other states and in counties and cities nationwide

• **Item** The business community and corporate philanthropists also have be discovering youth service as worthy of support. As *Business Week* magazine proclaimed recently: "The New Face of Public Service. It's young. It's ideali And its working." (October 24, 1988).

Perhaps it would be worthwhile for us to speculate about some of the reasons for this remarkable resurgence of interest in youth service. In doing, I want to celebrate the rise of youth service as a major public is as well as to raise some caution signs for your consideration. (These views, of course, are my own and should be attributed to the William Grant Foundation or to its Commission on Work Family and Citizensh

by SAMUEL HALPERIN
Study Director
Youth and America's Future:
The William T. Grant Foundation
Commission On Work, Family
and Citizenship

**'We" vs "Me" Generation?**

The first explanation that has been offered for the marked growth of service activity is the belief that many Americans are fed up with narcissism, personal gratification, and me-centered pursuits. Yuppie behavior is supposed to be on the way out and altruism and service on the way in. You know the rest of the argument and will have to judge for yourself how much substance there is in such assertions.

Personally, when I review the frantic activity of Wall Street's leveraged buyouts, mergers and takeovers, when I contemplate the excessive adulation and obscene compensation we accord to figures in the worlds of entertainment, media and athletics, and when I observe the enormous debt being piled up by both the public and private sectors in non-productive, non-investment consumption activities, I have great difficulty accepting the view that Americans generally are turning away from a fixation on me-now to a focus on others.

**Is America Number One?**

It is also argued that Americans have finally discovered we are no longer number one in the world, that eight or nine other countries have higher per capital incomes than ours and that almost all Western, industrialized societies have been able to earn their prosperity without anything like the enormous amount of poverty, infant mortality, incarceration, and human suffering that characterizes blighted lives in this country, verging on a quarter of our total population.

In this context, service to others is promoted as one of the best ways that society can demonstrate a commitment to turning things around. Name any problem — from our workforce's relative upcompetitiveness in an interdependent world economy, to the deplorable state of long-term care of the elderly, to the neglect of young children who need health care and daycare — and it is clear that service in general, and youth service, in particular, can make a large contribution to the building of a stronger and more humane America. Indeed, it is increasingly argued that America's accumulated backlog of human and environmental needs is now so enormous that there is no way to meet those needs solely through government action or through the free market. Only if we mobilize the voluntary, essentially non-paid, efforts of our entire nation do we have any reasonable prospect of eliminating that backlog of needs.

**Demographic Realities**

Another possible explanation for the almost sudden reappearance of youth service as a nationwide issue is that the nation's leaders in industry, government and the media have caught up with some harsh demographic realities. Foremost among these is that the nation is facing a potentially disastrous shortage of *productive* young people. As the Baby Boomers pass from center stage, our population of young workers ages 16-24, will decline over 20 percent by the year 2,000 from what it was in 1980. To maintain our armed forces at current manpower levels, both quantitatively and qualitatively, one of every three high school graduates will have to join the military forces. Colleges and universities and public and private employers will have to scramble for the rest.

**Learning skills and self-esteem**

More important than declining numbers is the fact that an increasing proportion of our children and youth are poor; suffer from various deficits in health,education and self-esteem; and are therefore unlikely to become productive contributors to society. By the year 2,000, one-third of our young will be minority members and a disproportionate percentage of them,*as many as one-half*, will be living in poverty. While youth service is no substitute for policies that combat poverty, increasingly, it is recognized as one of the most effective ways to enable young people to learn the skills that will help them to develop independence and to work their way to economic self-sufficiency.

**The Youth Service Movement**

Credit for the surge of interest in youth service also should go to the youth service organizations that have grown so vigorously in the past few years: Campus Compact and the Campus Outreach Opportunity League(COOL), the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, and especially, to Youth Service America the national advocate and representative of the entire youth service movement. Youth Service America has convened a Working Group on Youth Service Policy representing 16 major youth service organizations to coordinate support for legislative initiatives on youth service.

**Learning by Experience**

The mushrooming interest in youth service is also stimulated by a growing body of research that tells us anew what should have been learned many years ago: different people learn in different ways; to expect all of today's young people to learn everything that is essential in a academic classroom is a prescription for failure. That is why the William T. Grant Foundation's Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, in its two-year survey of research in many fields, placed so high a value on *experience-based* education and training. We found that most schools are incredibly rigid and homogeneous institutions that make little allowance for individual differences in learning styles, interests and learning sites. Instead of incorporating diversity in learning, American schools have narrowed the ways in which young people can succeed.

But apprenticeships, youth operated enterprises, cooperative education, community internships as well as service learning can open up rigid education systems. They call for a broader definition of education than what most learners are exposed to in traditional classrooms. ***Education is schooling plus experience***.

Education combines abstract learning with experiential learning opportunities. It melds conceptual study with concrete applications and practical problem solving. It is "hands-on" learning, learning by doing, trial and error, field work, laboratory work, demonstration and experimentation.

Sadly, however, it is precisely this kind of learning that is in sharp decline in most parts of the American school system. At the same time, those who share our outlook are energized by the knowledge that youth community service is one way to help restore experience to its rightful place of partnership in education. It can also engender a sense of "connectedness" in communities where so many young people feel alone and estranged.

## Potential Pitfalls

Along with the growing interest in and popularity of youth service, however, go a number of potentially serious pitfalls. Leaders in the youth service movement need to be quite vigilant about these possible threats.

First, some people advocate youth service as a way of "privatizing" the financing and provision of major public services. Volunteerism and service programs, they contend, can solve virtually any problem, so why not eliminate the role of government and save much public treasure?

Now I happen to believe that service is an exciting and vital *adjunct* to legitimate and well-conceived governmental action. We should not, however, turn to voluntary service as a means of allowing our various levels of government to evade their legal and constitutional responsibilities. Voluntary service and government service are both needed to assist the people and to serve the nation. It ought to be possible for a consensus to be developed that views youth service and government as allies rather than adversaries. Service cannot do it all, nor should government be let off the hook by abdicating its proper responsibilities to the private, voluntary sector.

A second potential pitfall: many people think of service as "cost-free," a "freebie." And, as just indicated, they claim that it will save vast sums of tax dollars. The truth is that good service programs create tax savings and public benefits even while they require the outlay of *additional* dollars, although these dollars may not necessarily come from government's coffers. Service requires planning and organizing, outreach, placement services and especially constant monitoring and supervision. To shortchange these essential dimensions of service is to court failure in any service undertaking.

Third, and flowing from the last statement, service programs must be *quality* programs. They should have a considerable amount of intensity, evoke genuine commitment from the servers, and be subject to periodic scrutiny and revision. 'Good service programs are not casual, com-as-you-can, leave-when-you-wish experiences. Nothing can destroy the morale of a volunteer — or the reputation of a youth service agency or program — more quickly than shoddy performance and poor placement and supervision. If youth service is to produce citizens who truly care, and not cynics who have been disillusioned and turned off in their service placement, we shall have to insist on standards for service that are every bit as rigorous as the standards governing our best school and factories.

Fourth, the need for assuring quality means that youth service must become an integral part of the formal education process. Time for reflection — for connecting what is learned in the classroom with what is learned in the service laboratory, and vice versa — is absolutely essential. Unless study and practice, theory and application are melded as part of a total educational process, service will become just another add-on, another competing claimant for the student's time and for society's scarce resources. When service and learning come together, a unique added value is created. Education, work, and civic needs are combined. Both the server and the served are enhanced and empowered. Society then receives the maximum return on its investment.

A fifth worry amid all the newfound attention to youth service is my fear that many will view service as little more than another form of philan-

thropy or social responsibility to those less fortunate that they. President Bush gave unwitting expression to such views when he proposed the YES Foundation last October. He said, "I want our affluent to help our poor...I want the young men and women of our tree-lined suburbs to get on a bus, on the subway...and go into the cities where the want is."

But service is not *noblesse oblige*. Every young person is a potential contributor to the improvement of his or her school, neighborhood and community. There is vital work to be done in every community. To reiterate the oft-quoted statement of Martin Luther King, "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve."

## A Universal Goal

The goal of youth service, then, is universalistic rather that elitist or paternalistic. We must resist all tendencies to make youth service merely an antipoverty program. Rather, we must insist that youth service is part of the dues all of us pay as citizens and heirs of a democratic society.

Today youth service, for all its fresh excitement, is still a small movement. Tomorrow, I am absolutely certain, that you who are giving of yourself to extend its bright promise will look back with pride and satisfaction on what you have built.

I close with the words of Margaret Mead:

**"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."**

***About The Author*** *Samuel Halperin, Study Director of the William T. Grant Commission on Youth and America's Future has headed several leadership training programs at the George Washington University, including the Institute for Educational Leadership, of which he was the director and first president.*

*As a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association (1960-61), he worked on both the Senate and the House of Representatives on major education proposals. As director of the U.S. Office of Education's Office of Congressional Relations and later, as Assistant U.S. Commissioner of Education for Legislation, he participated in the development and passage of such significant measures as the higher education acts of 1963 and 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and many others.*

*In 1966, Halperin moved to the Office of the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare where, as Deputy Assistant Secretary under Secretaries John W. Gardner and Wilbur J. Cohen, he continued work as an "executive branch lobbyist" associated with the passage of scores of Great Society measures in education and the social services. For these efforts, he was twice awarded HEW's Superior Service Award and the Distinguished Service Award.*

*Halperin received his Ph.D in Political Science from Washington University, St. Louis, in 1956.*